



April 3, 2009

Summer Learning and Closing the Achievement Gap

When you were a child, how did you spend your summer vacations?

This week in Washington, spring is delivering rain and cherry blossoms—but the mayor and leaders of city agencies, local non-profits and businesses are also thinking of summertime, children, and the experiences that will make their summer memories in 2009.

Summertime and Student Achievement

Since the late 1970s there has been a body of research growing on the relationship between the way students spend their summers and their achievement during the school year and over the course of their lives. It turns out that the age-old question many of us were asked every fall in school—“How did you spend your summer vacation?”—is not such a small question after all.

In fact, some researchers suggest that what children do in the summer is one of the largest factors determining how well they do in school compared to their peers. Many students experience a summer skills loss that has a cumulative effect on their achievement every year, and it contributes significantly to the large achievement gaps we see in this district and others. The same studies indicate that for children who are behind, school helps to catch them up.ⁱ

In a district facing achievement gaps of over 50% between white and minority students, my summer job will be focused on providing the [summer school options](http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/index.htm) (<http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/index.htm>) to help close this gap.

But many of you will be teaching children in different ways this summer. From our colleagues at the [Department of Parks and Recreation](http://www.dcsommerfun.dc.gov) (<http://www.dcsommerfun.dc.gov>), to the organizations and private companies who are hiring DC high school students through the [Department of Employment Services](http://does.dc.gov/does/cwp/view,a,1232,q,537757.asp) (<http://does.dc.gov/does/cwp/view,a,1232,q,537757.asp>), to those who will apply to teach this summer and the parents who are considering options for their children, the

whole city can be involved in preventing loss of skills over the summer.

Whatever your role may be, there is a lot to think about. What you teach children this summer will impact their starting point and success when they go back to school in the fall.

Priorities for Childhood: Work or Play?

As many of you know, when schooling began in this country, the summer break from school existed not as a vacation break but to support an agrarian culture in which children helped their parents to cultivate family farms. Learning occurred not with textbooks but with hands, and this out-of-school time was often considered a higher priority for achievement than classroom time.

Since then, shifts in means of survival and income, child labor laws and new views on childhood turned the picture of a summer of labor into one of “summer vacation.” When Americans redefined their beliefs about childhood, this became a time simply for children to be children—to play.

Current conversations in education circles suggest extending the school year, and the preservation of childhood is often the argument used to oppose such reforms.

But experts in education argue for the merits of year-round schooling: in light of a competitive global economy in which our children are behind children in other countries, and in light of disturbing achievement gaps between students in financially privileged families and those who are not, it would be irresponsible and negligent *not* to ensure that all children learn *throughout* the year. Unfortunately, as I have learned in my own household, this argument does not gain buy-in from 7 and 10 year-olds who enjoy their summer vacations out of school.

Because of my Korean ethnicity, this debate has also been raised with me by Korean officials and reporters who seek to reform the Korean education system. They point to a need for balance in the Korean system in which intense focus on rote learning through extended school time rarely allows for the afterschool enrichment activities that we prioritize in the United States.

Children *do* need time to be children, and educational systems and practices should reflect that. But here in DC we are looking at proficiency scores of less than 20% in math and reading, and we must seriously consider the relationship between summer learning loss and later student achievement. A necessary, urgent and immediate response has to include instruction to counter summer skill loss.

So how do we strike the right balance? How do we close the achievement gaps that grow with every summer vacation without sacrificing childhood to our drive for achievement?

Achieving a Balance: Summer Options for all DC Children

I believe the answer is two-fold.

One: Summer school is not the only option for summer learning.

I believe the achievement gap grows over the summer because some families have the means, whether financial or educational, to provide enrichment activities for their children that other parents do not.

This week in an informal poll asking how people spent their summer vacations as children, I heard about incentives parents provided for reading a certain number of child-selected books; extended hiking trips with hands-on learning about fish and wildlife; summer internships in high school; science, basketball and soccer camps; conversations that started with star gazing and cloud watching; and children's games counting fish in a creek, learning to distinguish salamanders from crayfish. The best memories all had something to teach—because children are curious, and child's play is the most meaningful gateway to learning that we have. Learning in this way is rooted in children's questions, the best place to start.

Yet children don't have to spend long vacations in the woods in order to learn in this way. The city has plenty to offer this summer, and Mayor Fenty is providing all residents a wide variety of choices for play and enrichment activities through the [Department of Parks and Recreation](http://www.dcsommerfun.dc.gov) (<http://www.dcsommerfun.dc.gov>), including options that come with little or no cost, and cost reductions for families that do not have the means for extensive vacations and camps.

Two: It is critical to offer [summer school options](http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/index.htm) (<http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/index.htm>) to parents, and at multiple sites to provide instruction near their homes.

Summer school is especially important in reinforcing the quantitative skills that do not get the necessary attention for keeping students on track with their peers in the fall.ⁱⁱ I am proud that even in a struggling economy we have been able to preserve this option for so many families who need it. It works against the gap created by privilege and allows all parents to ensure that their children can increase their skills in the summer.

A number of you have answered the mayor's call to employ DC's young people through the [Department of Employment Services](http://does.dc.gov/does/cwp/view,a.1232,q.537757.asp) (<http://does.dc.gov/does/cwp/view,a.1232,q.537757.asp>) this summer. This partnership with schools will ensure that high school students who need courses for graduation will not have to make the disempowering choice between a needed paycheck and professional work experience, and the academic skills and courses they need. Through [this program](http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/students-parents.htm#cp) (<http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/students-parents.htm#cp>) students will choose learning opportunities from a number of fields and gain the experience that can expand and inform their future career choices. I am grateful for the role that many in the DC business community have stepped up to play as they use their skills and expertise teaching and mentoring our students, who have much to gain from apprenticeship opportunities.

Right now we are busy [recruiting teachers for summer school and for these career-based courses](http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/employment.htm) (<http://www.k12.dc.us/schools/summer-school-2009/employment.htm>), and I encourage those with the appropriate professional skills to apply.

Passing the 10 Year-Old's Test

As you remember your own childhood summers, plan your programs, or sign up your children, let's work to provide summertimes that will stand up to the 10 year-old's test for quality. As our children play soccer, basketball, and swim, we don't need to press the point that they are building their kinesthetic intelligenceⁱⁱⁱ or shaping the perseverance and teamwork skills they will need in order to succeed in later professional years. As they follow their imaginations into good books, I will try not to mention that they are building their reading skills, fighting summer reading loss and preparing for the next school year. As they build spaceships after a trip to the Air and Space Museum, delight in the motions of fishes in tanks at the National Aquarium, or watch a bird go after a worm after a summer thunderstorm, we don't need to make them memorize that they are learning the principles of physics, or studying ecosystems, earth science and the unfortunate consequences of the food chain for earthworms.

Thank you for colluding with me to let children be children this summer. If we are smart about it, our attention in this work will fuel the questions that drive lifelong learning. The bigger their questions get, the more we can join them in that process as we dig for the answers with them.

ⁱ Alexander, Karl L., Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, "Summer learning and its implications: Insights from the Beginning School Study," *New Directions for Youth Development* 114 (2007): 11-32.

Alexander, Karl L., Doris R. Entwisle, and Linda Steffel Olson, "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap," *American Sociological Review* 72.2 (2007): 167-180.

Allington, Richard L. and Anne McGill-Franzen, "Use Students' Summer-Setback Months to Raise Minority Achievement," *Education Digest* 69:3 (2003): 19-24.

ⁱⁱ Alexander, et al., 11-32.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gardner, Howard, *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

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